

Singleness

1 Corinthians 7:25-38

In 2014 for the first time in our nation's history the number of single adults was greater than the number of married. Paul teaches many things that go against the culture of his day. Against Roman culture, he insists a wife has authority over her husband's body and wants marriages to endure. Against extra-biblical Jewish traditions, he allows women to divorce for biblical grounds. Now he speaks to the topic of singleness and its advantages during some seasons of life.

The Present Distress

On the topic of virgins Paul has no commandment from Jesus on when or how long someone should remain single (v1). The Bible describes some things as black and white, but others require us to apply God's wisdom in order to know what to do (Heb. 5:14). "Red letter Christians" who prioritize the words of Jesus over other parts of the Bible are disobedient to Jesus who honored all Scripture (Jn. 10:35). Paul points out that the Lord in His mercy has made him trustworthy on this topic—the well being of people's closest relationships. He speaks as a spiritual father and those who would serve others as spiritual fathers, mothers, brothers, and sisters must imitate him. He has sacrificially loved the Corinthians in calm times so they have reason to trust his advice during turbulent ones. The present distress or necessity in Corinth is likely a food shortage that occurred in the Mediterranean region soon after Paul left in AD 51. The same word *distress* occurs in Luke 21:23 when Jesus predicts the destruction of Jerusalem which took place in AD 70. The distress is significant enough that Paul recommends not changing marital status during this time (vv26-27). It's not a sin to get married, but those who do will have trouble, which he would have them avoid (v28). The time has almost arrived so they should already focus on preparing as if it was their only concern. It's not time to celebrate marriage, weep, rejoice, invest money, or be distracted by worldly concerns (vv29-31). While Paul is talking about specific circumstances that church would face, we can apply it in our day. He is telling them to be prudent because the future is uncertain (cf. Prov. 27:23-27). How many people went bankrupt in the last recession because they acted like the economy would boom forever? Our personal situations and the world changes constantly, so we should be wise. If you are a soldier going on tour, entering a phase in your career that requires constant travel or the like, it's probably not a good time to get married. A man should be ready to provide for his wife, and a woman to help her husband.

Advantages of Singleness

He wants the Corinthians to be free from anxiety (v32). Unmarried Christians can think solely in terms of serving the Lord without considering how it will affect their spouse and children. Husbands and wives still serve God but they do so in part by fulfilling their vows to one another (vv33-34). In Paul's theology singleness is an opportunity to serve to the Lord and not a time of drifting, waiting around, fulfilling

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selfish desires, mooching, or anything that smacks of adulescence. The unmarried have time and resources that they can use to bless others in a unique way. The vast majority of people will get married so singleness is usually a temporary season not to be wasted. Paul is not recommending, much less requiring, a celibate clergy. The regular pattern for ministers is to serve a household as a training ground for wisdom to know how to take care of the church (1 Tim. 3:4-5). But we should see the advantages of singleness and use it to glorify God.

Wisdom & Freedom

The goal is to serve God without distraction (v35). Immature people receive wisdom as constraining: “You’re saying I can’t get married!” “You’re saying I have to get married!” Wisdom constrains foolishness, but liberates the faithful. Paul addresses an exception to staying single during the time of distress. Whether he is talking about a father giving his daughter’s hand in marriage or a man marrying his fiancé doesn’t make much difference. We still have an apostle telling men how to lead sacrificially like Jesus. If a woman is older and wants to get married, it’s no sin, though Paul thinks if possible it’s better to wait (vv36-38). Our culture’s obsession with sexual identity reveals an identity crisis that Christians should have nothing to do with. You’re a Christian man or woman first, and if God calls you to get married, that calling is secondary to the call to follow Christ.